



Assessing - and Reducing - Public Fear of Muslims

Rachel M. Gillum, Stanford University

Presidential candidate Donald Trump waged a “tough on crime” campaign and vowed he would “make America safe” by implementing a “Muslim ban.” Soon after his inauguration President Trump followed through on his promise when he signed of Executive Order 13769, which temporarily banned individuals from seven predominantly Muslims countries from entering the United States. His declared goal was to protect Americans from terrorist attacks – and several national polls found that around half of all Americans approved the move.

Although this executive order has changed after repeated legal challenges, it highlights the broad perception held by many Americans that the terrorist threat to United States comes primarily from Muslims. Not only did the election of Donald Trump coincide with a spike of anti-Muslim incidents and hate crimes, the Pew Research Center found that half of all Americans expressed the belief that Muslim citizens are anti-American and more prone to violence and a third believe that Muslims should be subject to greater scrutiny than other groups in the United States.

Are such fears justified? Are Muslims the greatest terrorist threat to the United States – and are they more likely to support violence? Will placing more scrutiny on Muslims make the country safer? In an effort to answer such questions, my recent book, *Muslims in a Post-9/11 America: A Survey of Attitudes and Beliefs and Their Implications for U.S. National Security Policy*, assembles the latest research on U.S. terrorist attacks and government counter terror efforts. My research team and I interviewed nearly 200 Muslims living in the United States and conducted a nationwide survey of over 500 Muslims.

The Truth about Muslims in the United States

Several key findings suggest that government policies singling out Muslims are ill-informed and not likely to make America safer.

- **White supremacists and right-wing extremists are responsible for more attacks in the United States than Islamic terrorism.** Counterterror policies that single out Muslims miss the larger number of perpetrators from other groups and can waste valuable resources. Indeed, a secret New York police program that targeted Muslims based on their religious beliefs rather than criminal activity led to zero terrorism arrests during seven years of operation.
- **Muslim Americans are just as likely as Christian Americans to reject the use of any form of violence to further a political cause.** This finding challenges public perceptions of Muslims as more prone to violence and undermines official justifications for focusing counterterror efforts on Muslim American communities.
- **Tips provided by Muslims to U.S. law enforcement have served as one of the more prevalent initial sources for disrupting terror plots since 9/11.** This fact highlights the importance of positive relations between law enforcement and Muslim communities. Across the country, various Muslim American communities have spoken out against violence of all kinds and have programs to cooperate with the government in efforts to counter threats of violence or extremism.

The Costs of Inappropriately Targeted Enforcement

Given Muslim Americans’ rejection of violence and support for security efforts, my research identifies the downsides of policies that have wrongfully singled out this community for greater scrutiny.

- **Fears of being wrongly associated with criminal activity and treated in a discriminatory way make some Muslims hesitant to engage with law enforcement.** Such fears are similar to those of other minority communities. Reports of Muslims who are indefinitely detained or subjected to terror investigations for dubious reasons reverberate throughout the community, reducing trust that Muslims will be treated fairly by authorities. Immigrants are especially fearful of making reports to the police.
- **Cooperation between the federal government and some segments of the Muslim community has eroded since the election of Donald Trump.** After reports that the Trump administration was considering reconfiguring current counter terror programs to focus exclusively on radical Islam, several Muslim American organizations that had been awarded federal grants under the Obama administration decided to reject the government funds. Leaders of these organizations worry that associating with the administration could hurt their relationships with local community members.

The Right Way to Make America Safer

More accurate and complete understandings of the Muslim American community and the beliefs of its members are critical to combatting misconceptions and devising effective U.S. counter-terror policies. Not only must the rights and civil liberties of all citizens be protected, precious public resources should not be wasted on phantom threats. But changing public attitudes is not as easy as generating accurate research data.

Government leaders must present balanced narratives about Muslim Americans. Their portrayals must not just focus solely on security issues, and they should make clear that people in these communities do not support violence and willingly cooperate with authorities to combat threats. A recent Department of Homeland Security Report was widely criticized for manipulating evidence in misleading ways to justify greater scrutiny of Muslims. Fear campaigns by politicians are also very harmful – and have been shown to encourage anti-Muslim sentiment and hate crimes during election cycles.

Beyond officials and politicians, media outlets must also take responsibility for balanced reporting. When violent episodes happen, studies have shown that perpetrators perceived to be Muslim receive 450% to 750% more media coverage than those who apparently are not Muslim. Exposed to such skewed reporting, it is hardly surprising that many Americans over-estimate the threat of Muslim violence and inappropriately fear their Muslim fellow citizens.

Read more in Rachel Gillum, *Muslims in a Post-9/11 America: A Survey of Attitudes and Beliefs and Their Implications for U.S. National Security Policy* (University of Michigan Press, forthcoming).